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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the characteristics of students classified as being over or underachievers. The concepts of over and underachievement are most frequently defined in terms that relate to expectations based on ability measures. During the past 30 years there have been attempts to isolate the causal determinants of achievement. Variables such as inadequate motivation, lack of defined goals, emotional instability, bilingualism in the home, specific intellectual disability, poor study habits, the sex role and susceptibility to boredom have been investigated. (Author)

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Distinctive Characteristics of Over and Underachieving Students:

A Synthesis of the Research Literature

The concepts of over and underachievement need to be defined. The term overachiever suggests a paradox. Can students achieve higher than they are capable of? Brown (1962) said one may be excused for using the term only when it is defined with emphasis on the validity of grades as measures of either capacity or performance. Overachievers are usually defined as students with a performance record much higher than their tested capacity would indicate it should have been (Brown, 1962).

Underachievers do not perform to their expected capacity. These students have not behaved in such a manner as to live up to their predicted potential. Professionals often consider the underachiever to be a waste of valuable talent as well as being a drain upon the resources of educational institutions (Sattler & Neuringer, 1965).

Thorndike (1963) considers the terms overachievement and underachievement to be imperfections of our predictions. Prediction falls short of perfection due to error of measurement. As an example there is the problem of regression toward the mean, wherein students with high ability scores perform less well on an achievement measure, and students with low ability scores perform higher on an achievement measure. Students with high ability scores will "regress" down toward the average achievement value in the group, and by the same token, those below average on aptitude measures will show a regression upward on the achievement measure (Thorndike, 1963).

During the past 30 years there have been attempts to isolate the ~~casual~~ CAUSAL determinants of over and underachievement. Such variables as in-

adequate motivation, lack of defined goals, emotional instability, bilingualism in the home, specific intellectual disability, poor study habits, the sex role and susceptibility to boredom have been investigated. Sattler and Neuringer (1965) did a literature review on over and underachievement and found there are no marked trends among the groups except for value orientations toward academic success (motivational factors). Overachievers seem to be motivated toward academic success and underachievers are not. "Sex differences are few with the possibility that female underachievers are both more realistic in setting their aspiration levels and more ambivalent about their aims, while male underachievers are hostile and negativistic towards socially prescribed academic goals" (Sattler & Neuringer, 1965, p. 286.).

There is considerable evidence that negative interest or lack of motivation are primary contributors toward low scholarship (Tiebout, 1943; Morgan, 1952; McClelland et al., 1953; Maslow, 1954; Rosen, 1956; Kerns, 1957; Brown, 1960; McDonald, 1961; Wellington & Wellington, 1963; Finger & Schlesser, 1965; Atkinson & Feather, 1966; Moore, 1970; Maxwell, 1971; Brown, 1972; Evans & Anderson, 1973; Wankowski, 1973; and Atkinson & Raynor, 1974). Specific characteristics attributed to over and underachievement will be mentioned.

Morgan (1952) found overachievers to be more mature, serious, aware of others, dominant, self-confident and had a motivation to achieve. Underachievers were identified by negativism, less interest in reading, withdrawal from competition, high on the delinquency scale and less interest in academic motivation.

In terms of attitudes Kerns (1957) found that overachievers tended to go to college for intellectual reasons, and underachievers attend for negative reasons, such as getting away from home. Among college students, underachievers have stronger interests in social activities than intellectual activities, and the opposite is true for overachievers. Wellington and Wellington (1963) and Finger and Schlesser (1965) also found that underachievers have negative attitudes toward college that seem to block academic striving.

Maxwell (1971) suggested that underachievers are self-deprecatory, lack a clear system of goals and values, are vulnerable to disparagement by others, have immature relations with parents, lack insight into their problem and are likely to be anxious and depressed. Tiebout (1943) found underachievers to have similar characteristics. In summarizing the general characteristics of over and underachievers, Tiebout (1943) found overachievers to be candid and underachievers to be defensive. Evans and Anderson (1973) found that underachievement was related to values and experiences associated with the culture of poverty, specifically low self-concepts of ability, fatalistic, present-time orientation and non-democratic child rearing experiences. Wankowski (1973) found the successful student to be phlegmatic, relatively independent and versatile, unruffled by demands or pressures, and tolerant, thought not uncritical of his tutors and peers. Atkinson and Raynor (1974) found that underachievers are underachieving due to motivational problems, and that ability and motivation interact to account for different achievement levels.

Attempts to explain underachievement in terms of lack of motivation have concentrated on primary socialization practices within the family (McClelland, et al., 1953; Rosen, 1956; Rosen & D'Andrade, 1959; Holland, 1959; Brown, 1962; Sattler & Neuringer, 1965; and Evans & Anderson, 1973). McClelland, et al. (1953) summarized five years of intense research into the nature of achievement motivation and found that achievement motives develop in cultures and in families where an emphasis is on the independent development of the individual. Low achievement motivation is associated with families in which the child is more dependent on his parents and subordinate in importance to them. Rosen (1956) found that achievement motivation appears to be the result of two types of family socialization practices: achievement training and independence training. Achievement training involves parents setting high goals for the children and communicating to them that they expect evidence of high achievement. Independence training involves the parents encouraging self-reliance by granting their children enough autonomy to make their own decisions and to accept responsibility for success or failure.

Holland (1959) has found that motivation, as it related to achievement and underachievement among gifted persons, is a specific facet of the general problem of socialization. Brown (1962) likewise found that motivational factors are related to dispositions in the individual that may have been formed during primary socialization. Sattler and Neuringer (1965) found evidence that suggested the influence of the family environment is most significant in identifying over and underachievers.

There are numerous researchers who have indicated that teaching study strategies to a college population can make a difference in performance (Weinland, 1930; Eckert, 1935; Carter, 1948; Danskin & Burnett, 1952;

Maclachlan & Burnett, 1954; Shaw, 1955; McDonald, 1957; Davie, 1961; Pond, 1964; Pauk, 1965a, 1965b; Spache, 1964; Ikenberry, 1966; Crewe, 1969; Rickabaugh, 1969; Cartwright, 1970; Child, 1970; Christ, 1970; Egeland, 1970; Miller & Stillwagon, 1970; Pepper, 1970; Cartwright, 1971; Kerstiens, 1971; Ritter, 1971; Kaye, 1972; Kling, 1972; Goldman & Hudson, 1973; Goldman & Warren, 1973; Shaffer, 1973; and Treppa, 1973). In 1930, Weinland reported on the characteristics of good students and found they were self-reliant, avoided distractions, alternated tasks frequently, worked when interest in the subject matter was low, kept complete notes, read rapidly and belonged to social groups. Weinland (1930) concluded that students could be more efficient if they were given training in how-to-study. Carter (1948), Danskin and Burnett (1952), Maclachlan and Burnett (1954), Davie (1961), Pond (1964), Goldman and Hudson (1973), Goldman and Warren (1973), and Treppa (1973) found similar characteristics and concluded that most students could profit from pointers on efficient study habits. Observations of superior students indicate they are generally better organized while accomplishing academic tasks such as taking notes, working on examinations, and studying for assignments (Carter, 1948; Davie, 1961; and Pond, 1964).

Davie (1961), in reviewing the literature of superior students at Yale, found them to be serious, academically-oriented, upwardly mobile students whose major capabilities, interests, experiences and satisfactions lie in academic as opposed to non-intellectual life activities. In general, superior students exhibit habits or traits which are synonymous with effective study methods.

Identifying potentially good students has been attempted through study methods inventories. Responses from study habits inventories do correspond to GPA. These inventories may be identifying a proclivity for academic achievement by tapping motivational traits. This presents a difficult and complex question to resolve. Study methods inventories have been successful in adding to predictive formulas beyond ability measures, although conceptually there may not be general agreement about what is being measured (motivational factors, attitudes, interests or values).

CONCLUSION

Research indicates overachieving students have a desire to attain superior grades, and they utilize techniques that are considered to be efficient. They are well organized, flexible and avoid distractions. Underachieving students lack a clear system of goals, lack insight into their problems and are likely to be anxious and depressed.

Primary socialization practices are frequently identified as being related to student achievement. Low achievement motivation has been associated with families where the child is more dependent on parents and subordinate in importance to them. It has been theorized that achievement training involves parents setting high goals for their children and communicating to them that they expect evidence of high achievement.

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